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Global Migration and Transnational Politics

A Conceptual Framework

By Terrence Lyons and Peter Mandaville

Political dynamics around the globe have been transformed by globalization, new patterns of human mobility, and the development of innovative transnational social networks. Processes of globalization have provided openings for new actors and issues to rise to prominence and for novel forms of political action to gain salience. These new political processes are rooted in communities and networks that are not restricted by geographic location. As a result of increased human mobility and new forms of communications, the relevant constituencies engaged in a specific political process or issue often live in different locales or move between locations. Networks of activists and supporters are less bound by the need to work in close proximity or to accept notions that actors outside a state or territory are not members of communities rooted within a specific location.

While politics has been delinked from territory with regard to processes and actors, this does not mean that transnational politics generally focuses on universal issues or global approaches to social justice. Rather much of the new transnational politics is intensely focused on specific locations, identities, and issues. Politics remains fundamentally about local issues even while political processes are increasingly globalized.

These patterns may be seen in the new roles of diasporas in politics, where accelerating and expanding patterns of human mobility have resulted in significant populations that identify with a particular community and remain politically engaged in issues related to that group but are not resident in the “homeland” of that community at any given time. In other cases, the body politic may mobilize around issues that are not tied to a particular territory but are transnational by nature. Political thinking and strategies developed by populations that are mobile and located in multiple locations around the world shape how issues are framed and resources mobilized.

This paper sketches out a conceptual framework to investigate some of questions relating to the impact of global migration on transnational politics. Scholarly consideration of migration is well established and there is considerable research on issues relating to remittances and homeland development, the impact of new communications and information technology, international law and governance of global migration, and on immigrant integration and patterns of participation in politics in their new host countries. What is less studied is the question of how politics has been transformed by new forms of participation by increasingly mobile, transnational populations. Globalization has generated new means for transnational populations to influence and for homeland governments and social movements to seek to co-opt pressures from
constituencies abroad. Particular, specific political campaigns and strategies are in part the product of complex interactions between political and social leaders in multiple locations, with diaspora and other transnational networks serving key linking roles.

It is increasingly difficult to understand political outcomes in many countries by looking exclusively at actors operating within that state. Political campaigns in Liberia, for example, are shaped by transnational networks that link Monrovia with communities in New Jersey, Providence, and Minneapolis. Transnational networks often play particularly critical roles in the politics of communities where significant numbers live under authoritarian conditions that limit the scope for mobilization and debate. When political discussions and organization are stilled in one location, leaders and political processes in other locations often gain increased importance. This seems particularly important when the diaspora perceives that its homeland is occupied, as with Tamil, Eritrean, Kurdish, and Armenian diasporas, among others.

Decisions by the Ethiopian diaspora in North America and Europe shaped opposition participation in May 2005 elections. When the Ethiopian state faced political unrest in the aftermath of those elections it responded by indicting not only opposition leaders in Addis Ababa but also Ethiopian-Americans who ran politically influential websites and blogs and controlled political campaign funds from abroad. State actors have recognized the political power of transnational communities and have experimented with a wide range of policies on dual (or multi-) citizenship and on ways to manage demands in the domestic political arena emanating from abroad. In other cases, new patterns of human mobility have led to the circulation of individuals through different locations so that when they engage local politics they bring an identifiable transnational perspective and set of political strategies. Milan Panić in Yugoslavia, Ahmad Chalabi in Iraq, and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia used the social networks and political capital (or liabilities) they developed in exile after their return to political life.

In some cases political goals have become detached from territoriality and new forms of migration have generated new transnational actors promoting transnational political issues outside of the traditional nation-state. Mobilization around the Salman Rushdie affair in 1988, or more recently, the Danish cartoon controversy, for example, can best be understood by highlighting the links between Muslim advocacy groups in Europe, South Asian political movements, and various interlocutors at Islamic universities in the Middle East. In order to understand how agenda setting and the evolution of political strategy work in Middle Eastern-based Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, one needs today to pay as much (if not more) attention to Brotherhood supporters within Europe’s Muslim population as one does to the group’s formal leadership in Egypt.

New forms of media from blogs to satellite television to text-messaging have multiplied the places where political agendas are set, strategies developed, and leaders identified. Many transnational political movements strategically use segments of their constituencies located in different places to advance a common agenda through different actions. Those in Europe, for example, may take advantage of specific opportunities
embedded in the European Union framework while those elsewhere may seek to introduce an issue into a particular national political campaign or organize a demonstration before a specific meeting in London, New York, Geneva, Atlanta, or Davos. Globalization and human mobility, therefore, have not only created new transnational actors but also new arenas and spheres of influence in which to engage in politics.

These linkages between migration and globalization raise a series of important but understudied questions:

- What are the implications for political development, accountability, democratization, or conceptions of citizenship as the body politic becomes increasingly mobile and globalized, political affinities are delinked from geographic proximity, and critical constituencies reside outside of the territory of the state?

- Do those in diasporas and other forms of transnational communities tend to bring a certain type of approach or identifiable set of issues into political debates? Are there characteristics of politics in cases with significant transnational participation that are distinct from cases where politics is less influenced by constituencies living outside the state?

- Are there particular issues such as self-determination or identity that tend to attract more significant engagement from transnational networks and leaders? Why are transnational populations sometimes in powerful positions to shape political debates and outcomes and at other times are inconsequential?

These questions are critical to how we think about global human mobility and suggest an important missing piece to understanding the social, cultural, economic, and security dimensions of globalization. How migrant groups relate to development in the homeland, for example, should be understood in part by placing economic dimensions within a larger framework of globalized political processes. Remittances and other forms of patronage from abroad have profound consequences for local politics, for example, as neo-patrimonialism goes global. Issues of security and migration are in part shaped by the politics of conflict-generated diasporas and their links to political struggles in the homeland. Diasporas sometimes are inclined to denounce compromise and label those who seek a negotiated settlement as traitors, thereby limiting the range of possible resolutions that parties engaged in conflict may consider. Transnational processes have shaped how dispersed communities have developed and articulated their identities and strategic plans.

In recent years, a number of scholars have called our attention to the ways in which globalization enables non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other issue-based groups to organize on a worldwide scale. In particular, Keck and Sikkink’s (1998) influential study of transnational advocacy groups provided a foundation for the analysis of an emerging global civil society. Building on their work—now the standard reference
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point in the field—we have witnessed the growth of a thriving literature on new global non-governmental actors (Warkentin 2001; Mendelson and Glenn 2002; DeMars 2005; Ahmed and Potter 2006).

While clearly vital to any understanding of contemporary international affairs, the rise of the global NGO represents a distinct form of transnational politics quite distinct from the politicized human mobility that forms the core focus of this project. Keck and Sikkink help us to understand the motivations, mobilizations, and political opportunity structures that permit social movements and NGOs such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Doctors Without Borders, and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines to thrive in today’s globalized environment. While the enabling infrastructure of globalization is undoubtedly also central to the politics under study in this project, there are major qualitative differences that suggest transnational diaspora politics need to be viewed as something quite distinct. First and foremost, global civil society activity à la Keck and Sikkink is generally understood to reflect a sense of “global consciousness.” It can be regarded as the political mobilization of a normative project oriented towards avowedly “universalist” values (although many would point out that these values tend to reflect a predominantly Western liberal experience). In this sense, global NGOs and new social movements embody the ethics found in the cosmopolitanism of thinkers such as David Held (2004), Ulrich Beck (2006), Martha Nussbaum (2000), Archibugi et al. (1998) or Jurgen Habermas (2000).

In contrast to a transnational politics that takes the transformation of the human condition as its object, we find today many types of transnationalism that articulate highly particularist, parochial, and often territorially and ethno-nationally specific visions of the political. This new transnational politics, for example, furthers agendas tied to Kurdish nationalist aspiration as much as it advances projects framed in terms of global human rights. It is also important to note that while human mobility may be implicated in the work of transnational advocacy networks, global people flows do not in and of themselves induce this kind of politics. International solidarity between human rights activists in the West and the quest for self-determination in Tibet, for example, does not require transnational links based on mobility (Bob 2005). The specific type of transnational politics under consideration here has global migration—particularly when combined with the networking capacity of new media and information technologies—as the defining feature. Transnational politics is also distinct from globalization from below (Della Porta et al. 2006) or grassroots globalization (Appadurai 2000)—referring, for example, to efforts by indigenous peoples to advance their claims before a global audience.

In recent years, the literature on migration and human mobility has witnessed tremendous growth. The 1990s, in particular, saw a profusion of work dealing with various aspects of transnational people flows (Castles and Miller 2003; Hannerz 1996). Much of this was prompted by a desire to understand the causes and consequences of increased global labor migration (Sassen 1990) and the economic impacts of remittances on homeland development (Chaudhuri 1993). Other work focused on new challenges to the governance of global migration (Martin et al. 2006) and tensions arising from national
and regional immigration policies. Much of the scholarship in Cultural Studies, on the other hand, tended to explore the multiple identities and cultural forms that characterize the diaspora experience (Robertson et al. 1994).

The analytic frameworks and conceptual vocabularies that began framing the kinds of transnational politics of interest to this project were to initially be found in the fields of political sociology, anthropology, and social theory. Implicit in theories of nationalism such as Benedict Anderson’s renowned account of “imagined communities” (1991) was the idea that communal consciousness could be constructed in the abstract—via, for example, the distributive capacity of what he termed print-capitalism—and without the need for direct grounding in physical or territorial space. In a later essay, Anderson (1998) spoke with some alarm of transnational political consciousness among diaspora and exile groups as a form of “long-distance nationalism.” With ethno-national sentiment now decoupled from a territorial requirement, other scholars soon began to conceptualize the relationship between globalization and human mobility. For many, the changing nature of identity and community under globalization called for new theorizations of social affiliation and solidarity. It is indicative of the kinds of changes afoot that anthropologists, traditionally figured as purveyors of highly localized and particularist culture, were among the first to notice the ways in which globalization seemed to fundamentally restructure lives and livelihoods in local settings. The anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1996), for example, draws attention to transnational “forms of life,” in which the everyday experience of being Nigerian in a Delta village is constructed in good measure through diasporic connections to London that mediate receptions of popular culture and define the parameters of locality across enormous distance. Sociologically informed accounts of globalization, such as those of Manuel Castells (1996), emphasized the role of new transnational networks in forging and sustaining social relations across great expanses of geographic space.

A major advance in our understanding of the political dimensions of the new transnationalism was offered by another anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai (1996), who theorized this experience in terms of translocality. For Appadurai, translocality captures the idea that the nation-state has been displaced as the exclusive mediator of connectivity across and between disparate political communities. It now becomes possible, indeed in some respects already quite mundane, to claim that certain villages in Bangladesh are more intimately connected with suburbs of Bradford in northern England than with other population centers in Bangladesh itself—an experience of the “international” in which the nation-state is merely one actor among many. Appadurai’s translocality is nicely concretized by ethnographies such as those by Olwig (1993) and Levitt (2001), which provide rich accounts of the ways in which immigrant lives today are frequently simultaneously configured in relation to multiple settings. Other authors have focused on the dispersed structuring of socio-cultural practices across multiple, diverse, and often geographically distant settings. Basch et al. (1994), for example, address this phenomenon through their work on transmigration. Challenging the traditional framings in immigration studies of distinct ‘host’ and ‘homeland’ societies, these authors argue instead that human mobility today must be viewed in terms of the continuity of social relations across space rather than through abrupt ruptures between “here” and “there.”
Some scholars have figured this as an effort to move beyond what they see as the “methodological nationalism” present in much contemporary social theory (Wimmer and Schiller 2003). Appadurai (1996) also gestures more specifically towards the globalization of politics by introducing the notion of ethnoscape—a deterritorialization of communalist affiliation which suggests that under globalizing conditions, ethno-nationalist projects are constituted across a broad terrain (both spatial and imagined) rather than within the exclusive jurisdiction of a single polity. The hyphen that links nation and state, he argues, “is now less an icon of conjuncture than an index of disjuncture” (Appadurai, 1996: 160). Aihwa Ong’s (1999) work on Chinese transnationalism in East/Southeast Asia picks up on similar themes, identifying the presence in contemporary global politics of new formations of “flexible citizenship” that allow the nation-state and its ethnie to co-exist in mutually profitable tension. In his most recent period of work, Appadurai (1999, 2006) pushes the political analysis even further by explaining how, through the good offices of globalization, minority groups in various nation-state contexts are able to reconstitute themselves as a global majority by reaching out to co-religionists/ethnics abroad. For Appadurai, this explains, in part, recent increases in violence prosecuted in the name of communal identity groups.

In some cases, as Lyons (2006) argues, transnational politics remains intensely territorial in its focus and goals even if deterritorialized in terms of actors. Many conflict-generated diaspora groups such as the Tamils, Irish, Croatians, Armenians, and Eritreans, conceptualize politics in territorial terms—the liberation of a symbolically important piece of specific land (Hockenos 2003). Rather than seeking to build a deterritorialized transnational community, some diaspora groups retain and amplify attachment to their identity’s territorial aspect even if they are physically distant or unlikely to travel to that territory. A sense of solidarity and attachment to a particular locality can generate a common identity without propinquity, where territorially defined community and spatial proximity are decoupled without diminishing the salience of territoriality. Geographical detachment shifts the territorial concept from the “concrete to the metaphysical realm and from one that has relatively clear boundaries to one that is unbounded and abstract” (Newman, 1999: 13).

The recent literature on the socio-political dimensions of new media and information and communication technologies adds a new dimension to the ethno-political “distanciation” addressed above (Giddens 1989). The work of Mohammadi and Sreberny-Mohammadi (1994), for example, helps us to understand how, through selective messaging and the creative use of audio cassettes, the Ayatollah Khomeini was able to prime a popular revolutionary movement in Iran from the relative safety and comfort of a Paris suburb. Other studies of diasporic media (Karim 2003) also begin to pick up on the introduction of a new transformative dynamic in homeland politics emanating from discussions in print, Internet, and satellite television forums produced abroad. In one sense we are talking about newly globalized public spheres in which a variety of ethno-national political claims can be advanced. Yet the ability with which it becomes possible to target particular constituencies through the “narrowcasting” of diasporic political messages also begs the question of whether—picking up on Appadurai’s idea of translocality—we might be facing instead something more akin to a
new era of global public “sphericules,” (Cunningham 2001; Gitlin 1998) a rendering that hints at the ethno-national particularity and limited appeal of some of these media spaces.

Where the literature on diasporas and migrant communities has dealt with the politics of transnationalism, it has tended to either reflect national-territorial framings, on one extreme, or to seek to theorize past them on the other. A survey of existing scholarship on global migration and politics reveals that most work addresses itself to the following issues or variants thereof:

(a) The politics of integration and assimilation into receiving societies. A set of discussions sometimes framed, on one hand, in terms of concerns about “dual loyalty” and multiple political allegiances (Lucassen 2005), and on the other in relation to the contestation of hegemonic host cultures (Baumann 1996), this debate concerns itself primarily with questions relating to the capacity (or desirability) of immigrant communities to adjust to prevailing social norms as defined by the majoritarian culture. It is hence primarily concerned with the politics of immigrant reception and adaptation.

(b) The conceptualization of multicultural or post-national models of citizenship. Echoing aspects of the theoretical debates on cosmopolitanism (see above), this literature regards the presence of immigrants as an invitation to reimagine the meaning and remit of citizenship via various models of differentiated or flexible rights-holding (Soysal 1994; Kymlicka 1996; Parekh 2006). The primary orientation here remains that of a dialectic between host society and the (culturally distant) immigrant, albeit with the political onus resting here instead on the dominant culture of political affiliation—the institution of citizenship—to adjust to new realities.

(c) Diaspora and immigrant communities lobbying receiving/host states to adopt particular stances and policies towards political situations and conflicts in the homeland. A conceptualization of the relationship between diasporas and politics considerably closer to the framing envisaged by this project, the “ethnic lobby” approach (Anwar 2001; Sheffer 2006; Shain 2007) still relies too heavily on the nation-state as the intermediary political agent between transnational communities and the object of their political activism.

Much of the most recent literature on global migration and politics also starts from a dichotomized framework of “here” and a “there” that attaches political activity to one of two specific spaces – the sending or receiving societies – with the assumption of a correspondingly bifurcated political orientation on the part of immigrants. Alejandro Portes’s (2003) work emphasizes that transnationalism is state-bounded – for example, from a specific country in Latin America to the United States – and that political transnational ties, activism and involvement are socially bounded by territorial jurisdictions as well as preexisting power asymmetries. While migration scholars are recognizing that that enduring transnational ties are compatible with assimilation, they also argue that the numbers engaging in transnational political activities are small and
limited to the first-generation (Levitt and Schiller, 2004; Portes 2003; Baubock 2003). One group of migration scholars questions these binaries, however, developing an alternative theory of serial migration that accounts for people who move from place to place, “appear[ing] at home everywhere but belong[ing] nowhere” (Ossman 2004). The economic dimensions of migration also continue to be of major interest for many, especially remittances, hometown associations, and money transfers (for example, Portes et al. 2002). Such economic ties do indeed figure in the proposed work, but only where they have significant political implications.

A number of scholars today are also beginning to pay more attention to transnational political networks and practices, defined as “forms of cross border participation in the politics of [countries] of origin by both migrants and refugees, as well as their indirect participation via the political institutions of the host country” (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2001). We can identify an important shift that comes about with the publication of Al-Ali and Koser’s (2002) edited volume New Approaches to Migration: Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home. As the title suggests, this book focuses on how migrant experiences affect social, cultural, and political realities in their homelands. The first two sections of this collection address the meanings and transformations of identity and senses of home, place, and culture that accompany emerging transnational social networks. The final section of book, however, is explicitly focused on the political dimensions of diasporic homeland transformation. Amidst several chapters framed in terms of the traditional approach to diasporic politics (see above), we also begin to see the initial contours of a new approach to global migration and transnational politics.

In her contribution to the Al-Ali and Koser volume—and later in subsequent work—Fiona Adamson (2005) explores how “political entrepreneurs” are affecting transnational political mobilization and creating networks that do not include the state. She recognizes that there is an increased blurring of the distinction between internal and external affairs of state—meaning that the rise of these transnational practices have implications for politicized identities and national policies as well as the international system. Eva Østergaard-Nielsen’s (2003) research on Kurds and Turks in Europe also explores the consequences of migrant engagement in transnational political practices. She finds that migrant organizations and networks are influenced by global norms and yet remain embedded in local discourses, playing a serious and significant role in local, national and international political processes. This approach is also to be found in Mandaville’s (2001) work on Muslim networks in Europe and their impact on political discourse in the wider Muslim world, and in Lyons’ (2006) study of diasporas and homeland conflicts.

In the work of these various authors one can begin to discern the first impulses of a distinctive approach to global migration and transnational politics that permits us to understand how political processes are increasingly spread between multiple localities today. The agendas and goals are still often defined in territorial and normatively particularist terms, but the modes of organization and activism increasingly defy state
sovereignty and physical borders. The development of a systematic research agenda for the exploration of this phenomenon is hence an essential task.

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